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ABSTRACT

A university-public school partnership analysis reveals how the cultural context associated with existing institutions can both facilitate and impede the emergence of a new culture that those institutions attempt to create and often involves entire cultural reforms and organizational conversion. Brigham Young University and five surrounding school districts formed a partnership with the following objectives: (1) improve teacher and school administrator preparation programs; (2) use research findings in teaching and learning in the schools; (3) attract better qualified persons to the teaching profession; and (4) encourage collaborative inquiry by school and university personnel. Benevolent authoritarianism gave the formal partnership a structure; the informal cooperative networks have provided the spirit of collaboration. Two examples illustrate how conflicts between the host culture (authoritarianism and networks) and the ideals of the new culture could prevent progress if the organizational conversion process does not continue. (MLF)

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ABSTRACT

A university-public school partnership analysis reveals how the cultural context associated with existing institutions can both facilitate and impede the emergence of a new culture those institutions attempt to create and often involves entire cultural reforms and organizational conversion.

INTRODUCTION

"One cannot begin to understand the nature and process of organizational change without recognizing that the organization is influenced by, influences, and is actually an integral part of a larger social system." Marguilies and Raia (1980)

This study examined how some elements of the cultural context in which institutions exist can both facilitate and impede the emergence of a new culture those institutions attempt to create. The participants were Brigham Young University (BYU) and five surrounding school districts; the cultural innovation they are attempting is a partnership between them to address several common concerns.

The organization of the paper is as follows: first, the purposes of a larger inquiry from which this paper derived and the methods used to conduct the study are summarized; second, a brief description of the evolution of this partnership is presented to provide perspective for the rest of the paper; third, idealized characteristics of the new culture as proposed by participants in the partnership are summarized; fourth, some critical components of the cultural context which gave rise to and is now incorporating the innovative culture are introduced. Finally, a success story and a warning example are presented in an analysis of the development of the partnership as a case of organizational conversion.

PURPOSES AND METHODS

This study is part of a series of studies conducted to clarify the development of the partnership between BYU and several public schools, identify the problems they encounter, record successes they realize, and identify implications for educational change generally.

The methods used to conduct these studies included: a triangulation of participant observation of meetings and classes, interviews with participants, a review of documents created by the partnership, and careful description of participants' actions and the meanings participants associate with those actions. A variety of perspectives are being used to

interpret the findings from these many data sources. In this particular instance, theories about organizational development are used to identify insights that may be helpful to persons with particular interests in human factor issues in organizations.

EVOLUTION OF A PARTNERSHIP

During 1983, partly in response to the many national reports emerging on the need for reform in education, and partly due to mandates from the central administration of the university, the College of Education at BYU began to identify several activities to improve the performance of the college. One of these was a contract with Dr. John Goodlad to visit the campus and surrounding school districts to discuss issues in educational reform and help the college identify ways to improve. He had recently written a landmark book on this topic.

Goodlad came in a series of visits and met with administrators, faculty and students at the university and with representatives of some of the school districts most immediately served by BYU. In April 1984 he conducted several focused meetings with college deans and department chairs and five district superintendents to discuss their common interests and clarify how their needs overlapped among the six institutions. These meetings culminated in the formal creation of a partnership, expressed in some general objectives and a hierarchical organization.

The objectives are to improve teacher and school administrator preparation programs, better use research findings in teaching and learning in the schools, attract better qualified persons to the teaching profession, and encourage collaborative inquiry by school and university personnel.

The organization consists of a Governing Board (the college dean and the five superintendents of the districts), which sets policy for the partnership and delegates assignments for cooperative activities to members of the six associated institutions; a Coordinating Council (subordinate representatives of the Governing Board members), which is supposed to facilitate enactment of

Board decisions by their own institutions and make recommendations to the Governing Board; an Executive Director, who is employed by the university but is supposed to serve all members of the partnership by arranging meetings, preparing the agenda, seeking external funding, coordinating efforts, and so on; and several task forces (consisting of administrators, faculty and teachers from all six institutions), which are formed by the Governing Board and given specific "charges" to address certain of the partnership goals (administrators preparation, teacher preparation, guidance and counseling in the schools, research and evaluation, gifted and talented programs, preparation of special educators, etc.)

All persons within the university (particularly the College of Education) and the five school districts are technically part of this "new organization" and thus part of the partnership; however, most references to partnership activities are associated with the persons and activities in the formal hierarchical structure.

During the last three years, some of the task forces have made notable progress in encouraging educational changes in the university and in the schools of the partnership, while others have essentially ceased to exist. The Governing Board continues to meet monthly, as does the Coordinating Council. The Executive Director role has evolved from one of "executive secretary" to a more influential level. However, there have been conflicts and setbacks, too. In the remainder of this paper, some of the critical events are traced briefly and discussed in light of the theme -- which is that much of the success and difficulty can be traced to the host culture in which this new "partnership culture" was born.

IDEALIZED PARTNERSHIP CULTURE

The essence of the partnership concept is an egalitarian relationship between the partners and those whose needs are catered to by these groups, under democratic conditions. This position has been amply reflected in the College of Education Newsletter, Volume 1, No. 1, which asserts, "The strength of the partner school lies in the recognition that partners are dissimilar but equal, each having a mutual area of self interest that can be served."

According to this article, "the partner school," which is part and parcel of the partnership program, "is really intended to foster a symbiotic relationship between public school teachers, school administrators, college educators, parents, the students and concerned citizens to improve the quality of teacher preparation programs and the quality of learning in the schools." It is obvious that democracy and equality must permeate all segments of the partnership if these are to be truly symbiotic

and equal.

It is not so obvious how such an egalitarian ideal should or can be manifest in the context of a group of hierarchically organized institutions that have banded together to meet self interests. For example, should partnership mean egalitarian and democratic process across all levels of all participating institutions as well as across all institutions within a given level? For the new culture (partnership) to succeed, should members of the Governing Board consider themselves to be co-equal in a democratic sense with the members of each task force, as well as with all the persons within the participating institutions who are not on official committees associated with the partnership? Or should there even be such hierarchies in the partnership (although the six institutions consist of such structure)?

This study begins to address some of these issues by describing and analyzing the actual practices and reactions of the persons in this partnership. Although the "should" questions may not be answerable, at least as a result of one study, some ideas about the likelihood of success of an egalitarian culture within a nonegalitarian host culture are explored.

HOST CULTURE

Obviously this is not the place to analyze exhaustively the cultural context of BYU and the surrounding five school districts which compose the partnership. However, two fundamental aspects of that culture seem most critical to the analysis to follow: benevolent authoritarianism and informal cooperative networks. Both of these characteristics facilitated the initiation of the idea of partnership; however, one of them (authoritarianism) seems to oppose the ultimate realization of the ideals of symbiosis, while the other (networks) accounts for much of the success that has been realized thus far in the formation of this new culture.

Benevolent Authoritarianism

This characteristic is closely associated with the hierarchical structure that predominates in all six of the participating institutions of the partnership. Brigham Young University is privately sponsored by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS); the leaders of that church form its Board of Trustees. This board appoints the central administrators for the university, who recommend the deans of the colleges for appointment by the Board. The deans recommend persons for approval by the central administration and official appointment by the Board to be department chairs. Although there are faculty councils and student organizations, the predominant mode of decision making and leadership would best be

described as authoritarian. Of course, administrators believe that their decisions will benefit members of the university community and those they serve (and they often use information they gather from faculty and others)--thus the qualifying "benevolent authoritarianism."

The five school districts are public institutions; but they are also quite typical of most such districts in the United States. The school boards give authority to the superintendents to administer the daily affairs of the districts. The superintendent is instrumental in recommending the principals of the schools for appointment by the boards, and they in turn supervise the teachers of their schools. The state school board of education, office and education and the state legislature heavily influence the policies of the local educational agencies through law making and administration of state funds to those districts. These relationships tend to encourage authoritarian hierarchies within the school districts of the partner institutions.

In addition to these organizational characteristics, the fact that the majority of Utah's population are members of the LDS church plays a subtle but critical role in the cultural context. Because the LDS local clergy consist of lay persons, the superintendent of schools may also be a local stake president or bishop, who enjoys a position of respect and deference by members of the community. Although the Church goes to great lengths to separate church and state affairs, the benevolent authoritarianism of the Church might very well influence the attitudes of persons in the schools.

A fourth component of the culture which encourages benevolent authoritarianism is the fact that many of the school administrators and teachers in the five participating school districts received their degrees at BYU and had most of the current faculty as their mentors. Whether they view these faculty with respect or with contempt, these school personnel may still consider their former teachers to be authoritative figures.

An important manifestation of this characteristic of the host culture and its influence on the "new culture" of the partnership is the "top-down" way in which the collaborative effort came about. As outlined briefly above, the initiative came from university administrators, in cooperation with a nationally recognized authority. The very first action after formally creating the partnership was the formation of a Governing Board, the highest and most influential authority group in the new organization, consisting of the highest authorities from each of the cooperating institutions. This Board then proceeded to decide on the best way to operate the new collaborative and to appoint persons to carry

out specific assignments.

It seems that the characteristic of benevolent authoritarian has been both a helpful and obstructive influence on the partnership. The attempt at symbiosis might never have been made if the authorities in the participating university and districts had not taken the initiative. Small-scale cooperation among university faculty and school personnel had been a norm for years; but nothing of the scale proposed here had ever been tried by the rank and file of any of these organizations. On the other hand, the very philosophical framework for egalitarian and democratic cooperation within a true symbiotic partnership seems to be comprised by the authoritarian culture (be it benevolent or otherwise) which gave birth to it.

Informal Cooperative Networks

There appears to be an important network of relationship among members of the partnership which simultaneously facilitates mandates from the authorities (supports the benevolent authoritarianism) and helps those participants accomplish their own objectives, which sometimes counter the authoritarian mandates but most often coexist with them (perhaps individual-level symbiosis as opposed to institutional symbiosis?)

This may be the "true partnership," because it consists of BYU faculty working directly with "friends" in the schools to achieve ends they both value highly. Sometimes these interactions are recognized and encouraged by the formal partnership structure; but often they are either unheralded or actually denied and opposed by the authorities. For example, a science faculty member at BYU had been trying for several years to encourage school science teachers to attend a national conference. He had minimal success until he went to the Governing Board and presented his case. Although the Board did not have his idea in their formal plans, they passed along information to their districts; and teachers responded to the faculty member's invitation in record numbers.

Another example: A group of BYU faculty had been working for several years with colleagues they had fostered in the schools who were interested in gifted and talented programs. When the partnership formed, these faculty proposed to their dean that a task force be created to address such programs; it was, and they have used that group to formalize and accelerate the plans they had been working on already.

A BYU faculty member was appointed through the partnership to direct a new Principal Preparation program that relies heavily on intern experiences for the students in the schools. He used his personal connections

throughout the districts and the university to provide useful experiences for the students in many of the schools, rather than depend exclusively on the official mandate from the Governing Board to school officials to support this program.

A BYU faculty member spent several years developing a beginning reading program and trying it in many different schools. Then when the partnership was formed and he continued this line of research, he was told that because his program was not officially sanctioned by the partnership officials, he apparently was not interested in the partnership. He continued to work with several teachers to refine his program anyway.

A school superintendent recognized the program evaluation skills and insights of a BYU professor and invited him to help the district staff evaluate several innovations without going through the official partnership channels. The superintendent was pleased with the results; but the faculty member was chided by the university administration for not adequately supporting the partnership. The following year, the faculty member arranged to have his work in this district "count" as official partnership service; but he was again reprimanded, because he concentrated on evaluating the district's programs rather than focusing on general partnership-sponsored programs that were being tried in that and other districts.

These and many other examples suggest that sometimes, in spite of and often in support of the official partnership, there exist informal networks of relationships among the school and university personnel which help them address their mutual self-interests. Many of these interactions are not manipulable by the authorities; but insofar as the Governing Board acts to protect and encourage them, achievement of the partnership objectives is facilitated. Likewise, when administrators punish individuals for their cooperative work in the schools because those projects are not sponsored by the Governing Board, the egalitarian culture of the partnership suffers.

ORGANIZATIONAL CONVERSION

One helpful concept to consider in analyzing what is happening with this partnership is organizational conversion. The host culture, which consists of benevolent authoritarianism as well as informal cooperative networks (and many other components as well), has given birth to a new culture--an egalitarian partnership culture. But to develop that new organization, the six cooperating organizations have had to change and will continue to do so if the embryo is to survive.

The benevolent authoritarian structure gave the formal partnership a body; the informal

cooperative networks have provided the spirit of collaboration that accounts for many of the successes so far achieved. But there continue to be conflicts between the host culture and the ideals of the new culture which could prevent further progress if the organizational conversion process does not continue. Two examples illustrate this conversion process--one in which the informal cooperative network overcame the benevolent authoritarian structure to promote the major success of the partnership to date; and another in which the authoritarian structure defeated the network efforts.

A Successful Symbiosis

One of the first task forces to be established by the Governing Board was the Administrator Preparation task force, which was given the charge to "develop a model program for the preparation of school principals" by thinking "creatively and without concern for traditional preparation programs or current state certification standards." Representatives from all six participating organizations were assigned to this task force by their respective administrator on the Governing Board. One of the BYU representatives was appointed to be a co-chairperson by the dean; and the school district representatives selected one of their members to be the other co-chairperson.

After nearly six months of meetings to discuss the characteristics of principals and the programs that might be created to prepare them, the BYU co-chairperson began to be frustrated by the apparent lack of progress. Indeed, much of the time had been spent developing working relationships among the members, in particular, exploration by the school representatives of the openness of the BYU personnel to full-scale modification of existing administrator preparation program and other similar rapport-building activities.

In his frustration, the co-chair attempted to terminate the task force through an authoritarian maneuver (instructing the BYU graduate student who was acting as scribe for the group to report at the end of the latest set of minutes that the task had been completed). At that point, a critical set of informal network relationships came into play to save the task force and actually propel the group to success.

The graduate student contacted the school district co-chairperson and asked if the group had indeed completed the task and was to be dissolved. The co-chairperson, surprised at the suggestion, contacted several other members of the task force by telephone to assess their understanding of the situation and to mount an opposition movement. They quickly called a meeting of the task force, reestablished an agenda, and encouraged the dean to appoint a new

BYU co-chairperson. They then spent a difficult six months hammering out a recommendation for a new intern-based principal preparation program, which has since gained national recognition.

This example illustrates a familiar pattern for organizational change. Once the direction for change had been established (by the benevolent authority embodied in the Governing Board), there was a long period of oscillation and ambivalence during which members of the task force struggled with their assignment and their relationships. Then there was an attempted retroversion, spearheaded by one authority in the organization but philosophically supported by others who did not really want to change. But in this case, the retroversion was averted by the informal network component of the host culture, leading to a major victory for the new culture or organization. The resulting collaboration could be described as a type of syncretism between the two cultures, because the authority of the school district co-chair and the authority of the dean to appoint a new BYU co-chair were still needed, in conjunction with the informal network actions to solidify the new partnership organization and attitude.

A Warning

Another example illustrates a success for the status quo and failure of the new culture to truly manifest itself. The teacher preparation task force was also one of the first established by the Governing Board to do for teacher education what was to be done for principals by the administrator preparation group for principals.

This group of representatives also met regularly for several months and eventually presented a set of recommendations to the Governing Board. However; they stopped short of suggesting an actual program to enact their ideas, assuming that the Governing Board would form another group to "put the meat on the bones" of their discussions.

At this point, the university created a college committee to review its teacher preparation program; the committee used the suggestions made by the task force as input. After meeting for a few weeks, the chairperson of this group appealed to the university administration for some representatives from the schools to meet with, because this group of faculty realized they could benefit from such input (an example of the informal network seeking authoritative support for its initiatives).

The Governing Board responded to a request for a few representatives and also encouraged the group to continue identifying characteristics of "partner schools" (schools that would receive special attention and extra resources for a variety of purposes associated with teacher

preparation). The group also understood that the Board wanted them to identify ways to select partner schools from among the many schools in the five districts that might want to participate in this new program.

With this change in mind, the group met regularly for several months and eventually drafted a document describing different types of partner schools and a self-nomination process by which schools could express an interest in being considered for selection as partner schools. The Governing Board received this proposal rather coolly. They liked the definitions of types of partner schools; but they wanted to reserve the selection process as their prerogative and did not appreciate the task force's suggestion that it be an egalitarian process. However, the Board did not send a clear message of its reaction to the task force, which eventually dissolved itself with a memo stating that its members assumed they had completed their assignment. Several members of that task force were disappointed to learn later that the Governing Board had ignored their suggestions for the selection process; the teacher representatives especially felt that much of the task force's effort had been wasted. The benevolent authorities continued with their plans for the partner schools impervious to the reactions of these persons who had suggested a more democratic process.

This case illustrates oscillation and ambivalence during the history of the first teacher preparation task force and eventual retroversion to the authoritarian attitude in response to the second group's recommendations. No instance of syncretism seems to have emerged from this experience; in fact, the persons who had cooperated to propose the egalitarian and democratic way of operationalizing an important manifestation of the partnership idea were offended. The task force was essentially dissolved by the persons who represented the authoritarian component of the host culture.

CONCLUSION

These examples and this analysis should serve as a warning to persons who want to initiate major reforms in education or other organizations involving humans and human factors. Such changes often represent entire cultural reforms and organizational conversion. The partnership described here may yet develop into the truly democratic symbiosis envisioned by some of the persons involved; but it will do so only as the host culture nurtures and supports it.

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